

Don Ripplinger

History



Brigham Young University School of Music
Professor of Music Education/ Conducting 1975-1990
Interview March 2, 2009

Education

A.S., Weber College, 1951
B.S., Brigham Young University, 1954
M.S., University of Utah, 1965
Ph.D., University of Utah, 1968

Interview with Mike Ohman

Our hope is for you tell us a little history about you—how you came to BYU and what some of your goals and expectations, your dreams, were as a teacher. Begin with your early life.

I was born and raised in Ogden, Utah and took piano lessons for four or five years beginning at age ten. I always sang in school choirs and even attempted to play an instrument in bands and orchestras.

I graduated from Ogden High School in June of 1945 and left home in July to serve two years in the Merchant Marines as a seventeen year old. After sailing the Pacific to Okinawa, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines I returned home and left for a mission to Toronto, Canada in October of 1947. At that time you had to be twenty before being called to serve a mission.

My serious interest in music developed while serving in Canada. I was called to serve as the accompanist for the mission quintet which was a vocal group that toured the mission singing in schools, for public events, and on the radio. It was designed as a public relations enterprise in order to open doors for missionary work. We had no television in those days.

After returning from my mission in November, 1949 I started attending Weber (a junior college at that time) in January of 1950. My dad went with me to the registrar's office and paid the first quarter's tuition of \$22.50. Dr. Claire Johnson introduced me to the serious study of music and had more influence on me than anyone else during our time at Weber. I remember coming home one day and telling Dad I wanted to be a music teacher. He said that would be fine but "you should know you will probably starve." Being idealistic (and unrealistic) that didn't seem to matter.

After returning from my mission I met Myra who was a friend of my sister Jeanette. She was one of a group of girls who ran around together. We had our first date in March on her 18th birthday. She finished that year at Weber, and we were married in September of 1950.

I was student body president in the 1950-51 school year and had a job driving a mail truck from Ogden to Logan and back with stops in Brigham, Honeyville, Wellsville, and Willard. I would attend class until 1:00pm, take the mail route beginning at 2:00 and returning between 6:30 and 7:00pm, and then attend class from 7:00pm to 10:00pm three nights a week. My salary for the mail route was \$100 a month and

our apartment rent was \$30 a month. We thought we were in great shape.

We finished our two years at Weber and received a scholarship to BYU. In the summer of 1951 we purchased a lot at 350 East and 900 North in Orem and built a small 20' by 24' home. We borrowed \$2,300 to pay for the lot and build the house. We did all of the work. We laid the brick, poured the concrete, did plumbing and wiring, and did all of the carpenter work. Looking back now, it probably wouldn't be possible to do that today. When we graduated in 1954 we sold the house for \$3600 and paid off all of our school debt.

While we attended BYU I worked for Skaggs Grocery Store which was located across the street from the old post office on 100 North and 200 West. I worked each day (except Thursday) from 2:00pm to 10:00pm and all day Saturday- a total of 44 hours a week. My take home pay was just over \$40 a week. When we graduated in August of 1954 we had three children.

The campus during those years was very different from what it is now. There was the upper and lower campus. Lower campus was what is now known as Academy Square. Most of our music classes were on lower campus along with the BYU training school. On the upper campus there were the old BYU buildings: The Maeser building and the Brimhall building along with the Smith auditorium and the Science building. The old social hall building was in the area where the student health center is now located. Everything to the North was filled with orchards, quonset huts, and old army barracks used for married student housing. Most of the buildings in

the North quadrant of the upper campus were army surplus buildings.

One year the sewer system became plugged and when the plumbers dug down they found the problem to be diapers which were flushed into the system because the high pressure water valves grabbed everything they touched.

Buildings and grounds had their sheds and vehicles all stored on the North end of the upper campus. Quite a change from today's campus.

Professors in the music department were Crawford Gates, Leon Dallin, Newell Weight, Lawrence Sardoni, Ralph and Harold Laycock, Norman Gulbrandsen, Florence Jepperson Madsen, John Halliday and Dick Ballou. Homer Wakefield was the musicologist.

After graduation we accepted a position at Beaver High School in Beaver, Utah. I taught band, choir, general music, and a civics class. My first contract was \$2890 and our take home pay was \$220 a month. I also taught 15 piano students so we thought we were rich. We went to every new movie in town.

We stayed in Beaver just one year and then took a job at Olympus Junior High School in Granite District. When Skyline High School opened in 1961 we accepted the position in choral music and remained at Skyline until the fall of 1970.

I received a Masters degree from the University of Utah in 1965 and finished a PhD there in 1968. My doctorate was in Public School Administration. But for some unfortunate circumstances, it would have been in music. Even though

that has left me deficient in some areas of music it has served me well in the positions which have come our way.

I look at the education our daughter Jane is receiving as she concludes her DMA in choral conducting with Dr. Brady Allred at the University of Utah, and I realize how limited my knowledge is compared to her ability. It would have been very helpful to have the background and education she is receiving. The important thing is to do the best we can with our own abilities.

We left Skyline High School in 1970 to accept a position at the University of Wisconsin at Steven's Point where I was chairman of Music Education, choral director, and head of the graduate School of Music.

When a position opened at BYU in 1975 I was asked to interview for the job. I accepted the position offered and we remained at BYU until the summer of 1990.

When we came to BYU in 1975 Jerry Harris was in music education. Gordon Jessop came to finish his degree and remained on the faculty as did Susan Kenny. Evan Davis, and Rendol Gibbons were part of the music education faculty and Ralph Woodward was the director of choirs. Mack Wilberg and Ronald Staheli came later.

My teaching assignments were in choral methods, choral literature, student teaching supervision, and conducting. For two or three years I directed the University Chorale.

When we were called to the position with the tabernacle choir in 1975

President Kimball informed me that they would consider my appointment as a quarter-time position while BYU could hire me full-time with the two positions being completely independent of each other.

Brother Jerold Ottley had been thrust into the position of Musical Director of the Tabernacle choir because of the resignation of Jay Welch the preceding December. Jerry had worked for about seven months while waiting for the new associate conductor to be called. It was obvious early on that one person could not handle the demands of the choir but it wasn't until 1990 that approval was received to make the associate conductor a fulltime position.

Sharing time between BYU and the choir was very difficult and time consuming at times requiring 60-80 hours a week. In spite of this, we accomplished many things during the first 15 years. We organized a choir entrance and exit procedure which was fair to everyone, changed the entrance and retirement age requirement to meet the vocal demands of the choir and give members the opportunity to function in other church callings, and we organized training programs to improve individual musicianship. We also created a process to assist members who experienced vocal problems.

The full-time calling to the choir in 1990 included many administrative responsibilities. Today there are two secretaries and three full-time administrative assistants in the choir office.

Based on the present world conditions, the choir will probably not travel world-

wide as it did when we were there. We travelled to Japan twice, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Canada, England, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Israel, Poland, Austria, Switzerland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Russia in addition to many parts of the United States.

What is the effect of the choir on these tours?

The spirit of the choir has the greatest impact and, of course, the music does also. For example, when we were in the Bolshoi in Moscow I finished my conducting and walked off stage. As I approached the woman in charge she had tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn't speak English so she just patted her heart, pointed to heaven and said "chor," which probably is Russian for choir. We experienced this wherever we went.

In Jerusalem we sang for the Palestinians in the Jerusalem Center. Truman Madsen had made all of the arrangements and had invited all of the Palestinian leaders and professional people for a dinner and a concert by the Tabernacle choir. The response was amazing and the applause almost unending. At the end, Truman asked one of the Palestinian leaders to respond. He praised the choir and said "you have done more for the cause of peace in our country in the short time that you have been here than our negotiators have done in fifty years of talking."

At that point he turned to Jerry and said "My. Ottley when you come again please do not change the verse in the Battle Hymn- sing the one we know."

(Jerry had substituted a verse for the one saying *Christ was born across the sea* so we wouldn't offend the Jews.)

It doesn't matter where the choir goes in the world, the Battle Hymn of the Republic is our signature piece. Everyone knows it, loves it, and wants to hear it. A former member of the choir told me the story regarding recording the Battle Hymn. The choir was in Philadelphia making a recording with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Mr. Ormandy looked at Richard Condie and asked "are you really going to record that?" Richard replied "well, we planned to..." "Well," said Mr. Ormandy, "it's pretty corny, but it will make you a million dollars." The rest is history.

The choir is a great ambassador not only for the church but for the country. At President Reagan's first inauguration we were riding on a large float and stopped in front of the reviewing stand. The President and Nancy waved to us and we began to sing the Battle Hymn. The President took Nancy by the hand. She held on to him and by the time we were through they were both crying. It was a good thing it was pre-recorded because the choir wasn't able to sing. The spirit of the choir prompts those kinds of experiences.

It brings that kind of experience to worthy people.

Even if one isn't worthy but the Lord wants something done- it gets done.

You've had many hats: teacher, conductor, administrator, and you have also served most of your life in the church in a variety of callings.

At the University of Wisconsin we had the opportunity of organizing and running "Point Music Camp." The budget for the music camp was well over \$100,000. That doesn't seem like much today, but back in the 1970's that was a huge sum. We enrolled between six and seven hundred junior high school students for a one week camp and between three and four hundred high school students for a two week camp. We hired thirty faculty members and brought in a number of faculty members from BYU. It made for a wonderful and productive summer and it was a great recruiting tool for the University.

I have served in three Bishoprics, one district presidency, and as a counselor to President Norman Bangertner in the Johannesburg South Africa mission. In 2000 a new stake was organized in our area and I was called into a new bishopric. After five years we were released and a call came to serve on the High Council so church service never ends.

Serving in South Africa with former governor Norm Bangertner was quite an experience. We interviewed each missionary monthly and held zone conferences bi-monthly! That took two weeks each month and left two weeks per month for other administrative duties. The first six months of our mission were spent in a township in Pietersburg. There were 25-30 individuals attending meetings, but there were 120 on the branch rolls. After two months, there were often 100 attending sacrament meeting. We still have many friends in that branch.

We spent a good deal of time cultivating a relationship with South Africa

Broadcasting. Once they learned we were there we had an open door to their program directors. Music and the Spoken Word was put back on the air and they made it a point to play broadcasts where I was conducting. When we attended church in the townships the little children would run up to us and say "papa, papa, I saw you on TV!"

What are the differences between teaching young public school students and university students?

There is not a great deal of difference between public school students and university students. The greatest difference is probably one of maturity. If you love people and they know it, it doesn't matter whether they are six or sixty. A huge part of teaching is helping people accept the responsibility for who they are and what they do. It doesn't matter what you do in life if you know who you are and behave consistently with your value system.

There was an interesting difference between the students at the University of Wisconsin and students at BYU. At BYU there were some students who were instilled with a sense of self-importance and who had an exalted opinion of themselves. That was never evident in the five years we spent in Wisconsin. I've often wondered why it showed itself at BYU.

My biggest disappointment while teaching at BYU was the inability to develop a program for music educators based upon a sound philosophy of why music and music education are a vital component in the education of our society. As music educators we deal

extremely well with the technical aspects of music. We produce fine band, orchestra, and choir directors. We go on tours, we win contests, and we do musicals and all other performance related activities. We do our best to only work with the musically talented and the musically talented are well served by our own expertise. My concern is that we seldom deal at all with the “why” of music. Why does music exist? Why is music education a vital part of the entire education establishment? Why should it be in the school curriculum?

For years I have been a disciple of Bennet Reimer who is fifty years or more ahead of his time in developing a sound philosophical basis for music and music education. For many reasons, that never came to pass at BYU. I introduced Robb Dunn to Bennett and Robb did his doctoral work with him. Now that Robb is back at BYU perhaps he can succeed where I failed. If we do not know why we exist and are not able to articulate it, we are bound to become irrelevant. Using non-musical arguments to establish the value of music education has severe limitations. The curriculum reform movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s has bypassed the arts.

Talk about your life in education.

My most fulfilling and rewarding experience came in teaching junior high school, but every level of teaching has been challenging and satisfying. For me, the three most important things in life are family, church, and education. How many people get to spend their lives doing what is most important to them? How many have been able to see the world while doing the things they love? How many have had their family with

them to share those experiences? (At one time there were six members of our family in the Tabernacle choir.) How many have been so closely associated with general authorities and been able to feel of their spirit and influence?

Another great blessing has been watching former students move on to greater musical experiences and to see the influence they now have on the students they are teaching.

I often wondered why we have been given so many opportunities when, at times, there are many who are more qualified or more talented. You learn rather quickly that the Lord is in charge and is using you to accomplish his purposes. You try to do your best.

The first volume of the Joseph Smith Papers and the scholarly work being done on his legacy will be a monumental study and open entire generations to his achievements during the few short years of his life. The world will recognize what he did even though it may not accept it. We may think everything fell easily into place for him when, in reality, it took years of turmoil to complete his work.

It’s an awkward question, but if you could do your life over again, would you have done things differently?

Looking back from where I am now, the answer would be no. When we decided to finish a PhD my brother, who is a dentist, asked how long it would take. When he learned it would take three years he said in three years we could be through dental school and he would finance it. After thinking about it we told him “thank you, but no.”

One thing I would change is expressing my love and appreciation for Myra. She passed away three years ago and being alone has made me realize how complete she made my life and how incomplete I am without her. Why should such a realization take so long?

What are your hobbies? What are some of your memorable experiences?

I love classic and antique cars, I love to build, and I love growing things. My grandparents and my dad homesteaded on the Teton River in Idaho in the early 1900's. In 1940 we bought an additional 160 acres so most of my summers were spent plowing and harvesting. That, no doubt, has influenced my love for growing things and my love of animals—both domestic and wild. We have built three houses and owned over 70 cars of all kinds and ages.

Currently, one of my assignments on the high council is music. I recently received a telephone call requesting a violin duet

for a fireside the next Sunday to begin stake temple week. The arrangement for two violins and one piano was finished on Friday and taken to the violinist that night. Assignments like this are very common.

I also do a Christmas program for the stake, mostly traditional carols. Usually a hundred volunteer to be in the choir, and we have eight rehearsals. People fill the stake center; they love to come and listen. The program lasts about an hour.

Another of my assignments on the high council is the PFR—physical facilities representative. We've just finished building two chapels so I've been very busy with that. Church service never ends.

We appreciate knowing about you in your own words. Thank you for coming to the interview.



Don and Mike

